

FOR PLANNING AHEAD

The USACE Veterans Curation Program Soldiers On

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convergence (noun) - - the act of moving toward union; the merging of distinct technologies, industries or devices into a unified whole. . . The Merriam Webster Dictionary

There are convergences in Federal service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Veterans Curation Program is proof in action. Consider the following pieces of information that seemingly stand alone or appear at first to be unrelated: for the last one hundred years the Corps has been accumulating archeological materials and associated records that require, by law and regulation, a level of care and treatment that assures their continuing preservation; overseas contingency operations including Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) have produced veterans and wounded warriors who are unable, or lack the skills needed to compete in the mainstream job market; the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (otherwise known as the "Stimulus Bill") was oriented to developing projects and programs that provided short term investments to put Americans to work; and, the Corps' Mandatory Center of Expertise (MCX) for Curation and Management of Archeological Collections (CMAC) in St. Louis District, has answered the call for innovative and rapid responses to a range of Federal needs including the completion of the three-year Iraq Mass Graves Investigation Program.

Dr. Michael K. "Sonny" Trimble, Director of MCX CMAC, believes in convergences. On numerous occasions he has taken distinct threads of information and technologies and, along with a highly talented and innovative team in his Center and other Corps Commands has woven the fabric of award winning programs. Trimble and his teams have successfully completed projects such as GSA's African Burial Ground Project in New York City and the Iraq Mass Graves Investigation that other investigators and senior scientists have considered impossible to tackle. Now, with the seemingly disparate pieces of information above, he and the MCX CMAC have worked to create and implement the Veterans Curation Program (VCP). The VCP matches OIF/OEF veterans and wounded warriors who need practical skills and jobs, with the Corps' need to advance the public stewardship of federally owned archeological collections and associated records.

Originally funded by ARRA, the VCP has now been extended by the efforts of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works as part of the Corps' Operations and Maintenance Environmental Stewardship Business Line. Three laboratories operated and managed by the firm of Brockington and Associates, Inc. of Norcross, Georgia are located in St. Louis, Missouri; Augusta, Georgia; and, Alexandria, Virginia. The VCP facilities provide veterans with opportunities to receive competitive pay

while learning new job skills through technical training in a peer-to-peer veteran's environment. Skill sets being developed include: computer database management, records management, photographic and scanning technologies, instruction in archeology and archeological methods and techniques, archeological collections management and improvements to their communication and writing skills.

The VCP, working in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs, other government agencies and non-governmental partners such as the Central Savannah River Area Wounded Warrior Care Project and the St. Louis Hospital for Heroes/Veterans Affairs Medical Center is assisting VCP participants in job preparation and placement. The VCP work readily translate to entry level skills for the museum, forensics, administrative and records management fields. Jobs at the VCP laboratories are tailored to fit the capabilities of the disabled veterans and rolling employment offers on-the-job training and work to more veterans. To date, almost 100 veterans have participated in the VCP. Of these, 41 veterans were hired by outside entities for long-term employment during their participation in the program or were hired for permanent positions immediately after their participation. The VCP veterans are learning and developing skills that are in demand by Federal agencies, defense contractors and other companies in the private sector. In addition, 18 VCP veterans are now enrolled in colleges, universities and certificate programs. The VCP program and contract laboratory managers have always stressed that involvement in higher and further education is a key factor to success in the future.

The veterans participating in the VCP are not the only beneficiaries of the program. Some of the many threads that comprise the fabric of this effort include Corps archeological collections and records that, for some time, have existed in conditions that are less than optimal for their continuing preservation. VCP participants are working on refurbishing and rehabilitating collections from Corps Commands across the country beginning with cultural resources from Pittsburgh, Savannah, Mobile and Louisville Districts. The unique and irreplaceable archeological assets and records are repacked, restored and recorded using the most current and effective techniques known to curation and archival specialists. Digital imaging and digital storage of records and materials will ensure that Corps collections are maintained to the highest standards established by the curation community and Federal requirements. The refurbished collections and associated VCP work products will also be available for examination by researchers, educators and members of the general public in furtherance of the Corps stewardship and heritage asset management responsibilities.

Dr. Trimble is a strong believer in the concept of convergence. He and his team of forensic and archeological scientists spent three years in Iraq working with State Department officials, FBI agents and Iraqi Nationals searching for the evidence of Crimes Against Humanity that would ultimately convict Saddam Hussein's top lieutenants. Trimble would ultimately face the former Iraq dictator in court and testify to his crimes through the work of the Mass Graves Investigation. But he credits the efforts of Soldiers and Marines for his team's survival and he returned to St. Louis with a deepened sense of gratitude for those who serve our country in uniform. His work, and the work of everyone else associated with the creation and management of the VCP, is a small but significant effort to pay back that debt of gratitude.

The VCP has not gone un-noticed by others. The Honorable Ms. Jo-Ellen Darcy, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, speaking at the opening of the VCP Laboratory in Augusta, Georgia, expressed the views of the entire Administration and Federal Government. Ms. Darcy noted “no group of people has done more to forge our national identity throughout history than the veterans who have served and sacrificed for the Nation.” She went on to say “this is a very special project for extraordinary people, those who have served our country with honor. They deserve the best we can offer.”